THE PRODUCT, CARE AND SERVICE GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE HORSES
HORSE JOURNAL™

The Itchy Horse Can Drive You Crazy

Out-of-control scratching can lead to bigger problems and serious health issues.

One of the most infuriating, frustrating issues is a horse with skin problems. Thankfully, most horses don't have sensitive skin or allergies. But for the few unlucky ones that do, owners can be brought to tears, since the problem never really seems to go away.

Itchiness (also called "pruritus") can occur from a variety of causes and can start at any time during a horse's life. We'll take you through some of the common causes, and explain what you can do to mitigate the problem.

HELP! MY HORSE ITCHED HIS TAIL OUT! We've all seen it, heard about it, or experienced it: a horse scratching out his mane or tail. Even though these are the most common presenting complaints when it comes to itchy skin, several other behaviors and hair-loss patterns are also reported.

Commonly, horses will experience hair loss (aka alopecia) on their underbelly and ventral midline. Geldings may have firm, incredibly itchy sheaths with dry skin. Some horses will itch out hair on their face or on their haunches.

In rare circumstances, mares can present with a mammary gland infection (mastitis) which is caused when they "dog sit" on the ground and rub their bellies in the dirt. Dirt gets into their teat, which in turn causes an infection. But even mares with just dirty udders can become master tail-itchers. Keeping your horse's sheath or udder clean is step one in these cases.

Midline dermatitis, aka sweet itch, is caused by tiny bugs called "no-see-ums."

Some horses will lose hair in patches all over their body while others will repeatedly break out in hives. Regardless, these horses are usually very sensitive to the touch. Some of them itch so much it almost hurts. They may even want you to itch them to a point but then become stand-offish if you are over-zealous.

Although we don't commonly think of it, skin is a vital organ, as are the liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. If any of these became inflamed, we'd definitely sit up and take notice. Yet with skin, some of us more or less give up when we see lackluster results despite our strong efforts. Well, don't give up!

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. Horses that itch constantly can have serious physiologic consequences. Obviously the skin itself can be damaged by constant scratching. Horses will often rub so vigorously that they will macerate their skin. These cuts and scrapes are painful and can become infected. After many repeated insults, skin can actually become permanently thickened and scaly. This process is called "lichenification" and is irreversible in some cases.

Beyond the skin itself, pruritus can result in other physiologic problems. In some horses, itching is so intense that the horse can't sleep. After prolonged stretches (usually weeks to months) with no significant sleep, it starts to show.

Horses will become fatigued and can actually "zone out" and nearly fall over before they catch themselves. This behavior is not benign, since we know that horses must sleep in order to maintain proper brain function. Some experts postulate that the relentless itching irritates horses to the point where they develop gastric ulcers. So clearly, horses that itch terribly can truly be suffering.

Steroids: A Double-Edged Sword

When vets look at a skin condition, one of the biggest questions that they ask themselves is, "Should I give this horse corticosteroids?" Corticosteroids are a class of anti-inflammatory medication that can have wonderful positive effect in horses. They can make creaky, painful joints move again and they can make red hot skin that is on fire happy in a matter of hours. But they are not without another edge.

Corticosteroids can be risky in horses with bad gastric ulcers, a history of metabolic issues (insulin resistance, Cushing's disease), or other organ problems. Inform your vet about relevant medical history or conditions in your horse before he administers a treatment or therapy. Also, doing routine blood testing for equine metabolic syndrome (insulin resistance) and Cushing's disease (in older horses) is valuable.

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COMMON CAUSES. There are several possibilities when it comes to causes of pruritus in horses. But by far and away, biting insects are the most common cause. Owners often report that since they don't see any insects they doubt this as a cause. The problem is that most of these bugs are difficult to see with the naked eye.

Not all horses are sensitive to insect bites, just like not all dogs are sensitive to flea bites. But if your horse is one of the unlucky that is allergic to the saliva of a certain insect, life can be difficult.

These horses will itch on any object to try to find relief, even to the point of breaking boards and bending no-climb wire because they sit on the fence while rubbing their tails. Horses may even kick at their own underbellies in an attempt to stop the tingling.

Horses have little sense of self-preservation when they itch, and as a result many times skin can become deeply abraded and in some instances, will have foreign objects like wood splinters embedded.

If you're able to identify what type of insect is causing your horse to have skin reactions, you may increase your chances of controlling the problem. However, they may be sensitive to several types of biting insects, making it more difficult. Although none of them are easy to ward off, we've included in our chart products we think work best. (See charts on page 4.)

Hives require immediate veterinary attention (pollen may be the cause).

The causes for an itchy tail may vary, but the result is always ugly.

INSECTS AND BARN MANAGEMENT. Use fly masks with ears (see May 2012 for our favorite products at www.horse-journal.com). If you have trouble keeping your horse's mask on in pasture because of pesky pasture-pals, cut the Velcro closure to match the hook portion exactly so there's nothing for the other horses to grab and pull. Many horses think this is a fine game.

Be sure you fit the mask's closure snugly (but not choking tight) with just enough give in the elastic for comfort. This will decrease the chance of your horse being able to rub it off. If your routinely turn your horse out in a halter (because of barn rules or another necessity), only use a breakaway halter and place that over the fly mask for added security.

Horses can wear a mask at night if they are in a safe, enclosed, secure and familiar setting. Nose and ear flaps protect from sunburn and go a long way to relieving irritation by insects. While the lighter mesh fly masks are easier for horses to see through, they're not as durable and a rubbing horse will destroy them in no time flat.

Fly sheets with tail flaps, neck sleeves and, especially, wide belly bands increase protection over the common areas where flies bite.

Some fly sheets are impregnated with pyrethrins to repel insects; it's not perfect, but it helps. Fly sheets can stay on the horse 24/7 (since some insects are still active even in the late evening), but always take it off and replace it daily to inspect the horse's coat for irritations. Most fly sheets can be washed on the wash rack with a hose and some laundry detergent.

Fans in stabling areas can help inhibit flies from landing on and biting your horse in the stall (see page 13).

We love fly parasites! They're the tiny wasps that live in the manure pile and feed on fly larvae and can substantially reduce your fly population. Getting your neighbors to use them, too, is a big plus since you need a wide radius around your property to be depopulated in order to see the maximum benefit. These wasps do not sting or bite people, so don't worry! (See HJ June 2010.)

Of course, you know to manage stagnant/standing water by dumping and cleaning troughs periodically or if troughs are too large, use mosquito fish or mosquito rings. Always dump out standing water from buckets, tires, feed bins where it accumulates.

PLANT ALLERGENS. As if insects weren't enough to make our horses' skin crawl, some horses can have environmental allergies (see charts page 5). Horses can get instant, severe contact hypersensitivity reactions when various agents from plants come into contact with their sensitive skin.

For most plant-related hypersensitivities, removing either the plant from the horse's environment or the horse from the plant's environment is best. Of course, if you live in New York and your horse is allergic to Maple trees, or if you are in California and Oak trees don't jive, well, you've got quite a problem.

BOTTOM LINE. The fact is, controlling allergic reactions is no

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Best Choices for Insect-Related Treatment and Prevention

Treatment / Prevention	Comments	HJ Best Choices
Pyrethrin-Based Fly Sprays	• Apply liberally all over horse, especially to affected areas. • Use a brush, mitt or cloth to really work the fly spray into the coat. • Some fly sprays tout a 14-day spectrum of effectiveness, but we recommend spraying EVERY DAY during heavy fly seasons. • Apply at dawn and/or dusk since these are the times when insects are the most busy.	**Endure Sweat Resistant** (www.farnam.com, 800-234-2269); **UltraShield EX** (www.absorbine.com, 800-628-9653).
Fly Repellent Ointments	• Apply daily to affected areas (usually on the ventral midline/ underbelly, sheath, tail head, and along the backbone. • You may have to wipe off the previous day's application to start with a clean slate. • Mix a little over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream and/or aloe vera gel in with the fly repellent ointment to help soothe the skin. • Don't be afraid to dump a little fly spray into the ointment and mix it up before applying it.	**SWAT** (www.farnam.com, 800-234-2269); **War Paint** (by ChemTech; contact your local dealer); **Vicks VapoRub, Campho-Phenique,** and **Avon Skin So Soft** (available at human-product stores).
Soothing Barrier Products	• Stop using if product further irritates the skin. • Spot bathe the area with a gentle shampoo like Corona, Ivory soap or Orvus, before applying to remove secretions and dirt. • These products provide healing and a barrier but aren't highly repellent.	**Calm Coat** (www.calmcoat.com, 888-692-0021); **Shapley's M-T-G** (www.shapleys.com, 800-982-2017); **C4G Ointment** (www.uckele.com, 800-248-0330); **Su-Per Healing Ointment** (www.buygpdirect.com, 888-472-2825).
Spot On Insect Repellent	• Owners report that when pyrethrin spot-on is applied to the legs and back, it can ward off ticks for up to two weeks. (We've found it less effective on flies.) • Some horses get a tingling sensation when the spot-on is applied and foot stomping can occur as a result. • Even though the directions say to apply once monthly, it has been applied by many on a twice monthly basis.	**Equi-Spot Spot-on Fly Control For Horses** (www.farnam.com, 800-234-2269); **Celebration Spot On** or **Freedom 45 for Horses** (www.starhorseproducts.com).

The Prime Suspects for Insect-Related Itching

Insect	Comments
Culicoides (midges)	A tiny biting fly called Culicoides species (otherwise known as the midge) that conducts most of its business at dawn and dusk. These biting flies are so small that we cannot see them, hence their nickname, "no-see-ums." Culicoides cause large areas of hair loss and usually focus on the mane, tail head, and the ventrum of the horse including the sheath in geldings. Contrary to popular belief, these little flies can plague a horse all year round in most parts of the country. No solitary bite area can be seen, rather, there are large connected areas of intense skin hypersensitivity, lichenification, scales/scabs, and sores. The itchiness caused by these little devils is so intense that it has been famed "Sweet Itch" to describe the addictive sensation that the horse gets when the lesions are itched.
Mites (chiggers)	These crawling insects are very small and cause bumps and welts on the pasterns, fetlocks, and chin area (since they hang out in the grass and wait to latch onto the horse as it grazes by). The lesions are telltale as they usually have a gooey center with a sticky, yellow crust that is made from the horse's serum. These lesions can be itchy and irritating and owners report that within the span of a day their horse's legs and head can be covered.
Buffalo Gnats (aka Black Flies)	Buffalo Gnats are also a tiny fly that really go after a horse's ears and can actually cause a permanent plaque to form where they have fed inside the ear. You may see horses walking around with white lesions inside their ears—those are a sign that gnats have been at work. They are blood suckers and their bites are painful, but later the site is intensely pruritic.
Horn Flies	These little black flies are famous for settling in mini-swarms on the back and withers. They also spend a lot of time on the ventral midline. Usually a common pest of cattle, they usually will not be abundant on horses unless cattle are nearby. They chew on skin and suck blood until the horse has huge callous-like plaques on their feeding sites. These plaques are very itchy and horses will lean or stretch to get at them. If you are lucky enough to get the lesion to heal, the hair usually grows back white. These flies are also famous for transmitting pigeon fever because of a bacteria that they can carry on their mouthpiece.
Mosquitoes	Mosquitoes can cause generalized skin irritation since they are fairly indiscriminate as to where they choose to set down and drill. Also blood suckers, these pests can cause itchy welts. In addition, they can infect horses with diseases such as Eastern or Western encephalitis, West Nile virus and equine infectious anemia.
Horse Flies	These behemoth flies can't be missed. They have a bite that hurts and usually draws blood. They often attack the chest and back but are known to try to take a bite just about anywhere. In their aftermath they leave behind itchy welts.
Ticks	Ticks are a crawling insect that often are difficult to see. They can cause itchy welts with hair loss and a centralized scab. Ticks can carry disease such as Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever as well as Anaplasmosis (Erlichiosis). Also, out of all insects, they seem to be the hardest to actually repel (see Lyme disease on page 12).
Lice	Both biting and chewing lice can infest horses. They lay their eggs all over the horse, which then hatch into nymphs that also feed on skin and blood. Horses with lice infestations often are pruritic all over their body and have eggs that look like rice deposited onto the hair). Although lice infestations can be cleared up within 1 to 2 weeks after treatment, the skin can still itch for several months and in many cases takes a long time to become healthy again.

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Biting and chewing lice can infest your horse, laying eggs everywhere.

Control insects with a fly mask that covers the ears and nose, if necessary.

picnic. It's critical that you know exactly what you're dealing with.

If you try one of our suggestions and you see no improvement in your horse's skin within three days, contact your veterinarian. If you see worsening, call your vet immediately. The worse and larger the area becomes and the longer it goes uncontrolled, the more time it will take for you to get it under control and the longer your horse will suffer needlessly.

Next month, we'll talk about chemical and infectious causes, plus treatments.

Article by Contributing Veterinary Editor Grant Miller, DVM.

Typical Environmental Allergens

Allergen	Comments
Pollens	If your horse has seasonal hives or skin sensitivity, even if the season is fall or winter, the cause may be pollen. If the condition is repeatable and predictable and lasts for weeks to months, you may want to research the surrounding trees and plants to see if they happen to be pollenating at that time. If they are, they should be on your list of culprits.
Dust	Unlike pollen, horses that are allergic to stable dust (which includes various danders from other animals like cats) show skin hypersensitivity all year round. It is extremely difficult to control this contact allergy, since even the fanciest barns have dust. In many cases, the horse is reacting to dust that comes from the bedding, and so changing shavings may help solve the issue.
Plant contact (weeds/ grasses)	Weed and grasses will pollenate just like trees will, and so they should also be considered if your horse has a seasonal skin issue. However, sometimes they can irritate a horse all year round.
Mold	Some horses experience skin hypersensitivity during the colder, damper times of the year. Mold spores can cause intense hypersensitivity reactions that result in itchy hives. Sources of mold include damp stalls and wet environments such as wooded areas that are soaked in rain or morning dew.

Environmental Allergies Treatment And Prevention

Treatment / Prevention	Comments	HJ Recommendations
Aloe Vera Gel	• This soothing gel can be very helpful for dry, cracked and irritate skin. • It can be applied daily to affected areas. • It is safe for use and horses can even lick it/ swallow it and not get sick.	Lily of The Desert Whole Leaf Aloe Gel Stockton Aloe1 (www.aloe1.com, 866-691-0201) Generic clear pure aloe
Vacuum Grooming Systems	• While costly, vacuums can help remove contact/ topical allergens that bother your horses skin. • Brushes can spread allergens around on the horse and also irritate skin worse through repeated use in the same area. • Gentle vacuuming removes allergens and does not irritate skin. • Horses will need to be trained to tolerate the vacuum. • Many people just use a standard canister vacuum cleaner designed for household use, or a shop vac.	Eureka Mighty Mite Canister Vacuum Cleaner Vacmaster VBV1210 NA 12 Gallon 5 Horsepower Vacuum Cleaner Electro-Groom (uber-expensive! But boy it works!)

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